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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 002766

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/25/2026

TAGS: [EAIR](#) [PREL](#) [MOPS](#) [PGOV](#) [LE](#) [SY](#) [IS](#)

SUBJECT: RECONSIDERING THE AIR EMBARGO OF LEBANON

REF: A. BEIRUT 2672

[1](#)B. BEIRUT 2680

[1](#)1. (C) Via septels, we are reporting the Ambassador's meetings today (8/25) with Prime Minister Siniora and Deputy Prime Minister/Defense Minister Murr on the 8/24 unanimous cabinet decision empowering Siniora to request international help, from whatever source, for Lebanon's land borders, seaports, and airport. Both Siniora and Murr made it clear that the PM will use this authority to ask for technical assistance, training, and equipment from Germany. The request will fall short of asking the Germans to supervise customs, immigration, and other border procedures; the Germans will not be asked to "police" what happens at the border. Despite the pressure the air and sea embargo places on them, the Lebanese will continue to reject any kind of arrangement that whiffs of infringement of sovereignty or that smells like the EU work at the Rafah crossing between the Gaza Strip and Egypt. Whatever the requirements of UNSCR 1701, Siniora knows that he will be seriously undermined if he moves in that direction.

[1](#)2. (C) Thus, the request to the Germans falls short of the assurances the Israelis seek. Nevertheless, we should consider asking the Israelis to lift the ban on passenger travel in and out of Rafiq Hariri International Airport (BIA) entirely and on air cargo traffic between BIA and at least North America and the EU. Whatever security gains might accrue from the air blockade, they are now outweighed considerably by the political costs. There would seem to be even a security cost to Israel of the blockade, in that it is contributing to the impoverishment of an increasingly disgruntled neighbor and the weakening of a moderate Arab leader.

[1](#)3. (C) With the major security and smuggling problems related to the land border, keeping the airport closed (except for the Beirut-Amman air bridge) hurts our interest in the success of the Siniora government more than it addresses Israel's security concerns. There are also direct costs levied on us. Only a few weeks ago, we were unjustly accused of delaying a cease-fire and unfairly held responsible for civilian casualties and destruction by "made-in-USA" ordnance. These charges stuck, and generous reconstruction and humanitarian assistance alone will not reverse the damage done to our reputation. Now, our enemies here have latched onto the air and sea blockade to further tarnish our image. The blockade has become the current equivalent of maimed babies and destroyed homes in the propaganda war against us. Just as our humanitarian assistance was pointedly contrasted by Israeli bombs, we are accused of hypocrisy: we preach reconstruction, while

preventing the private sector from the trade and travel that would lead to reconstruction. With all foreign visitors to Lebanon (including allies like the French) calling publicly for lifting the "siege," we alone are seen as culpable.

14. (C) The people who have the most to gain from the air and sea blockade are Syrian black marketeers and those who try to paint the United States as the implacable enemy of Arabs in general and the Lebanese specifically. In last night's cabinet meeting, the Hizballah ministers made a strong case that the GOL should ask the Syrians for extra facilities for trade and travel, given the ongoing blockade. Having just won Hizballah's acquiescence in asking for help at the international borders, the March 14 ministers did not have a ready answer about why not to ask for Syrian help, when the economy so desperately needs immediate relief. While Syria right now seems in no mood to help Lebanon (as the cut-off in electricity deliveries shows), it would seem, from a security angle, that diverting trade and travel to Syria actually makes it easier to hide people and weapons in the increased traffic that would result. The Syrians must take great comfort from a Lebanese cabinet debate on whether to ask for Syria's help in evading an Israeli embargo (and Syria starts looking like Lebanon's friend and savior, while we appear to be the enemy).

15. (C) It is clear that Lebanon has unambiguous obligations under UNSCR 1701 to secure its borders and combat arms smuggling. It is also clear that Hizballah and others have used Lebanon's entry points for alien and weapons smuggling. But international representatives in Lebanon, save us, believe that the GOL has taken sufficient, credible measures in response to UNSCR 1701 that change the procedures at the airport (reftels): the Hizballah-sympathizing head of airport security has been sidelined; a new airport security

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committee is headed by a general loyal to Walid Jumblatt; and the Sunni-loyal ISF has replaced the LAF for some processing.

However imperfect the situation at the airport, the "status quo ante" does not prevail. In addition, Siniora is on the verge of sending a letter to the Germans requesting additional technical assistance, training, and equipment. As far as these go, these are all victories -- and would not have come about without the pressure of the embargo and our near-daily (sometimes twice daily) demarches to the PM. But we come to a split in view: the Israelis and we hope for some kind of international control or monitoring, whereas the Lebanese are backed by virtually everyone else in saying that the Lebanese have the sovereign right to remain in control but with international assistance in the form of training, technical assistance, and equipment.

16. (C) Seaports are not in the same category as the airport. To the best of our knowledge, there have not yet been the same sort of changes made at the seaports as at the airport. Moreover, there is an easy tripwire that could signal when to allow the seaport to open for all commercial traffic: either Lebanon acquires, installs, and actually uses container scanners (reportedly on order but not yet delivered), or Lebanon agrees to some kind of maritime check of incoming cargo. We also need to keep the pressure on installing a credible system of controls along the Syrian-Lebanese border. The Ambassador will see the German ambassador to see if we can gain a better understanding of just what the Germans are proposing for the land border, which is the biggest problem and where we should focus most of our attention.

17. (C) But, while the Lebanese could solve the airport problem on their own simply by citing UNSCR 1701 to invite international monitors to watch the procedures, political realities prevent Siniora from proceeding in that direction. We have two ways of seriously undermining Siniora now: we could push him into asking for international monitors (giving his -- and our -- enemies a wonderful propaganda tool), or we

could permit the continuation of the air embargo. We should consider whether it is time for the USG to consider exercising the means that could get BIA reopened for all passenger traffic and air cargo between Lebanon and North America and the EU (at least). The U.S. should get credit for BIA's reopening, not blame for its closure. If the air blockade is still in place at the time of the Stockholm Conference next week, the embargo, not Lebanon's reconstruction, will be the primary focus of Stockholm participants. It will surely feature prominently in the GOL presentation. As the only defenders of the embargo present in Stockholm, we will be put in an extremely awkward position. The intended message of support to Lebanon will be lost, as we are forced to battle an image that we alone are indulging Israel's air blockade. However unfair, accusations of U.S. hypocrisy will hang over the Stockholm proceedings.

FELTMAN